



WORK SESSION of the Greenbelt City Council

Held Wednesday, July 12, 2000

For the purpose of discussion of the proposed five-year plan for the City Playgrounds

Mayor Davis started the meeting at 8:45 p.m. It was held in the Multipurpose Room of the Community Center.

PRESENT WERE: Council members Edward V. J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts, Alan Turnbull, Thomas X. White, and Mayor Judith F. Davis. Mr. Putens and Mayor Davis left before the end of the meeting.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael P. McLaughlin, City Manager; Kathleen Gallagher, City Clerk; Kenneth Hall, Acting Director, Public Works; Bill Phelan, Acting Superintendent of Operations, Public Works. David E. Moran, Assistant to the City Manager, attended the beginning of the meeting.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Sheldon Goldberg, Greenbelt East Advisory Coalition; Frank White, the Gazette; Barbara Young, the Greenbelt News Review. A number of residents of Greenbelt Homes, Inc., attended, as well as Julia Eichhorst, Dorothy Lauber, and Sylvia Lewis, GHI Board.

The Mayor expressed Council's apologies for having been delayed in an Executive Session and for the fact that some of those attending had not gotten the word that the meeting had been rescheduled from 8:00 to 8:30 p.m.

After introductions, Mr. McLaughlin gave an overview of the situation, saying that the five-year plan for the playgrounds is responsive to new guidelines on safety in playground equipment and materials published by the Consumer Products Safety Commission and the American Society for Testing and Materials. He emphasized that these are guidelines, not regulations; however, when the rules are published from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), they will be mandatory. During 2001, the intention is to take care of so-called Priority I and life-threatening items. The resurfacing of the playgrounds is the highest priority in terms of safety, as well as being the most expensive item. It make sense to do other work while the resurfacing is being done. Although the City has not had actual problems with injuries on the playgrounds or with lawsuits, the staff is concerned that there could be serious liability issues now that the guidelines have been published.

The Mayor indicated that since most of the people attending the meeting had come because playgrounds in their immediate neighborhoods in Greenbelt Homes, Inc. (GHI) were listed to be closed or moved, she would like to focus on those playgrounds as quickly as possible.

Mr. Phelan then started through the slide presentation demonstrating the playgrounds' areas of noncompliance in both surfaces and equipment.

Mr. Roberts asked about the possibility for repair rather than replacement of equipment. Mr. Phelan responded that the problem with repair is one of liability; he doubts that a repair person could guarantee the reliability of the equipment.

Surfacing: In response to a question about wood-chip surfaces, Mr. Phelan said that although it no longer meets guidelines, a wood-chip surface still provides a lot of protection and helps to keep the problem from being Level I. The new surfaces will be shredded rather than chipped. They will also be more than twice as deep, which means the wood ties containing them will be twice as high (12"). Some people think that will produce a higher risk of tripping over the ties; other people say that the barrier will be more conspicuous and thus safer. Because of the height of the ties or container, however, it is important that the entire area be surfaced, rather than surfacing the area immediately around equipment. Questions were raised about whether it is possible to dig down 12 inches rather than having the surface raised 12 inches above ground. Although this is theoretically possible, it is more likely to damage the root systems of older trees. There must also be proper drainage, which is easier to manage above ground. Questions were raised about rubberized surfaces, which are more expensive. Staff brought samples of three varieties of the new surfacing, none of which inspired an enthusiastic response from Council or others.

31 Court Ridge: This playground and the one at 39 Court Ridge were slated to be eliminated and replaced by one at 56 Court Crescent. The perception was that there was little neighborhood support for keeping the playground at 31 Court Ridge; it would also be prohibitively expensive to rehab because of accessibility problems for vehicles. Residents attending the meeting said that a petition had been signed against the rehabilitation of this playground because of concerns with the landscaping and the way the playground surfacing would look; they very much want to keep a playground, but they do not want an ugly one.

39 Court Ridge. There is also a vehicular access problem with this playground. All the equipment is more than 20 years old. In this court, too, there are concerns regarding the aesthetics of the new playgrounds. A resident spoke in favor of getting professional advice from a landscape architect and asked the city to consider rubberized surfaces, even if this delayed the time for action. The City should also consider the size, colors, and number of pieces of equipment relative to the surrounding spaces and buildings.

Mr. Turnbull noted that one of Greenbelt's unusual and attractive attributes is that it has many small playgrounds that are extremely convenient; that they are so integral to the neighborhoods, however, means that aesthetics is a big concern.

GHI/Greenbelt East: Mr. Goldberg asked what the City's deal with GHI on playgrounds is and whether Greenbelt East could negotiate to have the City take over its playgrounds. Mr. White responded that the relationship was not so much a "deal" as it was an evolution of the original government ownership of the cooperative. Ms. Lauber added that the government had deeded the playgrounds to the City; the City provides and maintains the equipment, and GHI maintains the grounds. The Mayor said the City could discuss the Greenbelt East question.

Playground at St. Hugh's: Since this playground has a different type of equipment, there was discussion for alternatives for replacing it. Ms. Lewis said she objected strongly to the provision by the City of a playground that mainly serves a private school. Mr. McLaughlin said that while St. Hugh's might be the main user, he believed there were also many children from the neighborhoods who used it, particularly going back and forth to the town center, youth center, or the playing fields.

It was agreed that there was not a consensus of Council on materials or design for the playgrounds and that there would have to be one or more additional work sessions. Council asked staff to provide information on a wider range of materials, including more expensive options, and that information should also be provided on maintenance and life-cycle costs. Mr. White asked whether doing demo projects might be feasible: i.e., pick a few representative playgrounds and try some of the alternatives. Mr. Phelan said that if Council wished to do that, it would be helpful to identify the demo sites at the next meeting and that these sites should be both high-use and representative playgrounds. There was also discussion of bringing in representatives from some of the companies who make the equipment and materials.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen Gallagher

City Clerk